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Los Angeles Times

LARGEST CIRCULATION IN THE WEST, 958,124 DAILY, 1,269,931 SUNDAY.

S—PART ONE CC F MONDAY MORNING, JULY 7, 1969 98 PAGES
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DAILY 10c

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VOL. LXXXVIII † FIVE PARTS

Mineral King: Head-on Clash of Big Names

Disney Firm, Sierra Club Battle Over Resort Plans; Injunction Ruling Near

BY PHILIP FRADKIN
Times Staff Writer

The slide presentation was popular with the luncheon group of Los Angeles businessmen. The spokesman detailed the financial success of Walt Disney Productions in carefully modulated tones and in understated terms.

The next slide that flicked on the screen showed a skier with his parka tied about his waist, hiking over a High Sierra snowscape. He was carrying his skis.

The Disney spokesman commented, "I just thought I would throw that slide in. A group of Sierra Club skiers made a trip in there this spring by helicopter."

That solitary skier has come to symbolize perhaps the hottest conservation versus manmade development issue in the nation today—it is a $35 million plan by the Disney firm to develop—with the consent of the U.S. Forest Service—the once obscure area of Mineral King in the Sierra Nevada into a major resort.

77,000 Club Members

Opposing Disney and the federal agency is the Sierra Club, a 77,000-member conservation organization which maintains that Mineral King should be left as it is.

The club, which at first had approved a modest resort development in the valley, changed its position four years ago. The once low-level opposition now has grown to a point where the club filed suit last month to block the development.

U.S. Judge William T. Sweigert of San Francisco took the case under submission last Tuesday after hearing arguments from club and government attorneys.

He is expected to rule on the request for a preliminary injunction sometime this week.

Sierra Club officials admit that the two-mile-long valley of Mineral King is not the sort of area they ordinarily would fight to preserve. It is not a wilderness, there is a road into the valley and a few mountain cabins cling to its hillsides.

Typical of High Sierra

"The area is not unique in itself. It is fairly typical of the High Sierra. This is the first time we have been involved in a fight to preserve such an area, but we feel California is getting down to an irreducible minimum," said Michael McClosky, 35, the club's executive director.

On the other hand Disney and U.S. Forest Service officials claim there are not that many areas left where a summer recreation and winter ski resort of major dimensions can be located.

The Disney interests looked at Aspen in Colorado and Mammoth Mountain and Mt. San Gorgonio in California before settling on Mineral King in the early 1960s.

"We feel we are satisfying a public need here," said Robert Hicks, project manager for Disney.

What the public wants now or will need in the future is interpreted differently by the Sierra Club and Disney and the Forest Service.

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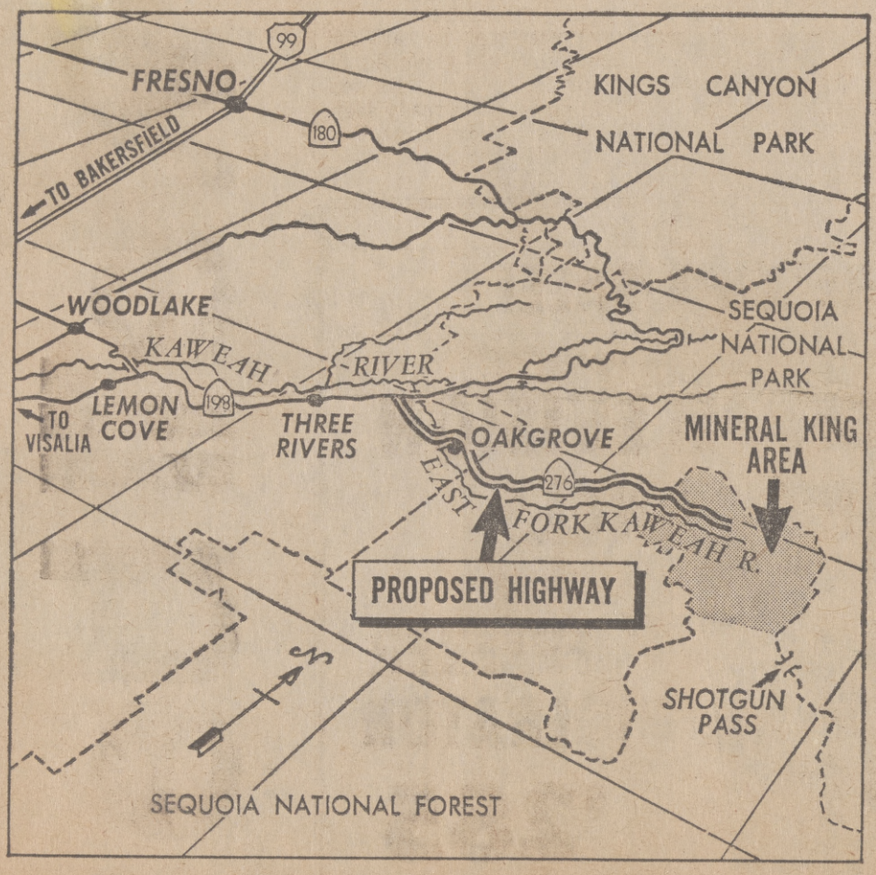

KEY TO DEVELOPMENT — Proposed highway to Mineral King. One of the development's last hurdles is National Park Service approval of right-of-way.
Times map by Harlan Kirby

Mineral King: Head-on Clash of Big Names

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The central question is whether to leave such areas in their natural state for the few willing to make the effort to visit them or to open them up for the many by providing easy access and conveniences.

The controversy has focused on the role of the Forest Service which administers Sequoia National Forest where the resort would be built 55 miles east of Visalia and about equal distance between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The federal agency has given the impression of being less an objective regulatory body than a partner in development of the project, a role which both Forest Service and Disney officials emphasize.

The Forest Service operates under a multiple use concept. This permits cattle grazing, timber cutting and skiing on Forest Service lands where they would be denied or severely limited in national parks.

The Forest Service also administers wilderness areas and thus has a dual role.

At Mineral King the Forest Service first called for a minimum $3 million development. Disney proposed $35 million and as yet no limits have been placed on future plans.

Forest Service and Disney officials say these limits can be determined on a step-by-step basis as the project progresses, but the Sierra Club believes that once the gates are opened there is no end.

The example of overcrowding at nearby Yosemite National Park is frequently compared to the plans for Mineral King. Regardless of the assertions of careful planning, the precedent is disturbing to some.

Forest Service approval of the Disney master plan was announced last January in the company's Burbank studio, rather than on some neutral ground. Shortly after, the Forest Service issued a pamphlet which answered criticism leveled by conservationists.

The Disney project, as planned, will be the largest such development on Forest Service lands. It is estimated that more than a half million dollars a year in revenue will accrue to the Forest Service.

The stakes also are big for the Disney firm. Already $1 million has been spent on planning for the project.

First Controversy

Walt Disney Productions is faced for the first time with a public controversy.

It also is the first time the Disney firm has not had complete control over a project, such as Disneyland and Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla.

The name calling has been vicious and pickets have appeared outside the Burbank studio during a stockholders' meeting and have threatened to lie in front of bulldozers at Mineral King.

"I doubt," said one company executive, "if Walt would have gone ahead with it had he known about the opposition of the Sierra Club before his death. He considered himself one of them."

He added, "We have no alternative but to wait out the suit because so many people are dependent on us."

He cited the money and time spent by the State Division of Highways on planning and design of the access road which will bisect Sequoia National Park.

Economic Issue

Also, the economic expectations of Tulare County have risen with the plans to develop the mountain valley far beyond original projections.

Boise-Cascade Land Co. has taken an option on 12,000 acres for a "recreation community" near the gateway area of Three Rivers, whose residents also plan to get in on the expected bonanza.

It is these mushrooming plans that worry Sierra Club officials into thinking that Mineral King will become a Sierra eyesore.

"There is economic and political pressure to roll over everything in sight," McClosky said.

Like the Disney firm, the Sierra Club finds itself in a state of change as it enters its latest conservation battle, the first such fray since a major reorganization last spring.

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MINERAL KING

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McClosky and the club's new president, Dr. Philip Berry, have vowed that the club will maintain its "militant" conservation stance.

"We are fairly confident the suit will delay the project, and this delay will raise questions in Congress," McClosky said.

There are some who believe that by vigorously tackling Mineral King, the club officials also are seeking to prove they have lost none of their militancy.

The key to Mineral King's development has been construction of a two-lane road to replace the partially paved narrow, twisting road which provides limited access to to the valley.

The 25-mile road will cross 8.5 miles of Sequoia National Park. And one of the last hurdles the development has to face, besides resolution of the suit, is National Park Service approval of right-of-way for the highway which will cost $22.5 million in state funds to build.

It has been suggested by the State Division of Highways that the road, which is now scheduled to be paid for with gas tax monies, be financed by a toll, but the Legislature has taken no action.

Two Different Views

Critics of the Mineral King development contend the public should not pay for a road which will serve a private developer. The opposite argument is that the taxes and economic benefits of the resort will generate enough tax money to repay the state investment.

Forest Service and state highway engineers say they are taking the greatest possible precautions with the design of the roadway, which could handle between 800 and 1,200 cars an hour each way, and that no Giant Sequoia trees will be endangered, as the Sierra Club claims.

Besides right-of-way approval by the Park Service, expected to be granted this summer, the first contract for construction of the road has to be let by the State Division of Highways before the Disney company is awarded a 30-year permit to develop Mineral King.

So far, the Disney firm has been carrying out its planning studies on a three-year preliminary permit with a one-year extension.

The extension, necessary until road commitments are finalized, is believed unprecedented in Forest Service procedures for such developments.

How "public" will the leased Forest Service land at Mineral King be?

In one sense it will be very public; about one million visitors are expected annually as compared to the 24,000 who made the trip last summer. The valley, at the 7,800-foot level, is now inaccessible in winter.

But while a summertime visitor now can drive into the valley and camp for free, once the Disney proposal becomes a reality parking will be in an eight-tiered structure, which will hold 3,600 cars, outside the valley.

There will be a charge for parking and for transportation to the village on an electric-powered cog railroad.

Hotels, Restaurants

Although the original Disney proposal left room for camping in the valley, there are no such provisions in the master plan. Camping would be on private land the Forest Service plans to condemn below the valley.

Because plans for camping in the valley were eliminated from the final master plan, the original expected level of visitors was dropped from a previous 1.7 million to 986,000.

Within the valley there will be accommodations ranging from dormitories to luxury suites for 3,310 persons. One hotel will be five stories high and there will be 10 restaurants.

Sierra Club critics have labeled Mineral King a "mountain Disneyland," but there is little evidence, except for the large way in which the company is tackling the project, that this will be so.

The architecture, described as an "American-alpine style," will fit into the landscape, company officials say.

There will be 22 ski lifts to carry winter skiers from the valley floor to five alpine bowls and mountain peaks at the 12,000-foot level. About 8,000 skiers a day will be accommodated by the facilities.

To provide a "mountain experience" in the summer, according to the Disney master plan, such activities as swimming, three-par golf, hiking, tennis and horseback riding are planned along with more sedentary pastimes.

The Sierra Club argues that these improvements, in an area designated a National Game Refuge by Congress in 1926, will ruin the life cycles of plant and animal life.

Disney executives reply that such manmade facilities as avalanche controls would limit natural destruction.

"This winter 1,000 trees were taken out by avalanches," Disney spokesmen said.

But whether the resort will be built is not dependent on the different ideas on how to treat California's dwindling mountain areas, but on legal points raised in the Sierra Club suit. These points are:

1—Whether the development conflicts with the National Game Refuge status of the 15,000-acre Mineral King area.

2—The right to construct a road across a portion of Sequoia National Park which would not serve the park itself but rather the Forest Service lands beyond it.

3—Whether the alpine village and other structures would take up more than the 80 acres which Congress has set as the limit for resorts developed under lease on Forest Service lands.

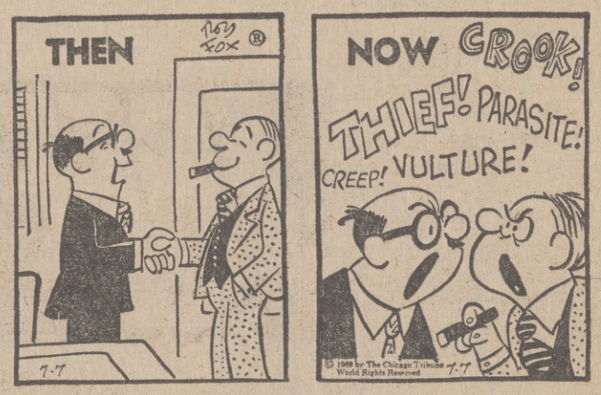
4—The alleged failure of the Forest Service to hold public hearings, and the lack of a completed study to determine the impact on plant and animal life.

The suit, which asks for a preliminary and permanent injunction, was filed against the secretaries of agriculture and interior and various national forest and park officials.

The Disney firm was not named as a defendant.

Sierra Club officials say that should they fail to get a preliminary injunction, they are prepared to fight the development through appeal procedures.

Present plans call for completion of the road in late 1974 with limited skiing facilities ready soon after. Full development of Mineral King is scheduled for 1979.



"We've been good friends for 30 years, Fred—we'll make great business partners."